

**BORDER POETICS: GENDER, ESSAYISM AND  
BORDER CROSSING IN SINÉAD GLEESON'S  
CONSTELLATIONS: REFLECTIONS FROM LIFE**

**LA POÉTICA DE LA FRONTERA: GÉNERO,  
ENSAYISMO Y CRUCE DE LA FRONTERA  
EN *CONSTELLATIONS: REFLECTIONS  
FROM LIFE* DE SINÉAD GLEESON**

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**Abstract**

As Julie Bates claims, “the most exciting new writing in Ireland is happening in the field of nonfiction” (2020: 228-229) and, more particularly, in the form of the essay. Sinéad Gleeson uses the confessional mode in her essay collection *Constellations: Reflections from Life* (2019) to recount her experiences of two deadly illnesses and to challenge ideas that readers might have about themselves or the world. She contemplates her body and life as an Irishwoman in her roles as daughter and patient, and in a variety of social and familial roles. Gleeson also explores the female body in pain, in sexuality, and in the struggle for recovery and change both in the Irish context and universally. This courageous example of essayism crosses many borders: the geographical and social, theory and practice, and thinking and creating.

*Border Poetics De-limited*, edited by Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe (2007), examines the role of art and culture in constructing and tracing borders, focusing on narratives and other symbolic forms, and on the important subjective dimension which cultural forms mediate in the public sphere. This article explores how and to what effect the devices proposed by the authors of this collection can be used to relate Gleeson's essayism to several concepts of border crossing, such as how the border crosser and border-crossing narrative work from a feminist perspective.

**Keywords:** Sinéad Gleeson, border poetics, non-fiction, illness, gender and politics.

## Resumen

Como argumenta Julie Bates, “the most exciting new writing in Ireland is happening in the field of nonfiction” (2020: 228-229) y, más concretamente, en la forma del ensayo breve. Sinéad Gleeson usa el modo confesional en su colección de ensayos *Constellations: Reflections from Life* (2019) para contar sus experiencias sobre dos enfermedades mortales y para desafiar ideas que los lectores podrían tener sobre sí mismos o sobre el mundo. La autora reflexiona acerca de su cuerpo y su vida como mujer irlandesa en sus roles de hija y paciente, y en una variedad de funciones sociales y familiares. Gleeson también explora el dolor en el cuerpo femenino, en la sexualidad, y en la lucha por la recuperación y el cambio en el contexto irlandés y universal. Esta colección valiente de ensayos cruza muchas fronteras: las geográficas y las sociales, las fronteras entre la teoría y la práctica, y entre el pensamiento y la creación.

*Border Poetics De-limited* editada por Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe (2007) examina el papel del arte y la cultura en la construcción y trazado de fronteras, centrándose en narraciones y otras formas simbólicas, y en la importante dimensión subjetiva que las formas culturales median en la esfera pública. Este artículo examina cómo y con qué consecuencias Gleeson utiliza las estrategias propuestas por estos autores para relacionar el ensayo como género con diversos conceptos del cruce de frontera, por ejemplo, cómo la persona que cruza la frontera y la narración del cruce de fronteras funcionan desde la perspectiva feminista.

**Palabras clave:** Sinéad Gleeson, poética de la frontera, no-ficción, enfermedad, género y política.

## 1. Introduction

In a recent investigation, Julie Bates claims that “the most exciting new writing in Ireland is happening in the field of nonfiction”, which can “in part be ascribed to a number of literary magazines, successors to the twentieth-century little magazines that also fostered short-form writing, and, then as now, exerted a considerable influence on Irish writing” (2020: 228-229).<sup>1</sup> Several important little magazines in Great Britain, such as *Blast* (1914-1915) and *The Egoist* (1914-1919), and in Ireland, *The Klaxon* (1923-1924) and *The Bell* (1940-1954), were created in the first half of the twentieth century to promote new ideas and art forms, to take risks and to challenge public taste in order “to provide an outlet for work that would not appear otherwise” (Bishop 1996: 287). Much of the Irish non-fiction emerging today also comes in the form of short pieces, such as the essay, with writers like Emilie Pine,<sup>2</sup> Ian Maleney<sup>3</sup> and Sinéad Gleeson, who use the confessional mode to

challenge ideas that readers might have about themselves or the world, and to support contemporary social change, securing the continuity of their impact on the youngest generations.

The essay is defined by Brian Dillon as “[a] form that would instruct, seduce and mystify in equal measure” (2017: 13) and “[n]ot the practice merely of the form, but an attitude to the form —to its spirit of adventure and its unfinished nature” (20). As Bates argues, essayism in Ireland,

As an elastic, mongrel type of writing [...], is alert and hospitable to contemporary ideas, voices and settings. In its orientation away from the past, the conventional, and the insular, it is an apt and corrective mode for a country that has tended to endorse narratives of collective victimhood that disavow responsibility and blame, even while that country is undertaking the current intense and belated scrutiny of institutional and social abuse and neglect. (2020: 228)

In this context, *Constellations: Reflections from Life* (2019), the first book of personal essays by Gleeson, and winner of the Irish Non-Fiction Book Award, recounts her experiences of two deadly illnesses (monoarticular arthritis and acute promyelocytic leukaemia, APML), the first as a teenager, and the latter before her first pregnancy. The collection revolves around these two significant diseases and their impact on her body, offering the reader some insight into Gleeson’s reworking of her material as her life story unfolds. In fourteen essays, each unusually, but aptly, named after a different constellation, Gleeson pulls off the feat of turning long-term pain, shock, fear, anxiety, frustration, despair, rage, shame, and profound gratitude for medical care and the support of loved ones into a unique essay collection. Yet *Constellations* is not just a retrospective exercise in self-reflection about two periods of serious illness; it also contemplates at length Gleeson’s body and her life as an Irishwoman in her roles as daughter and patient, and in a variety of social and familial roles. The tone is humorous and ironic. More particularly, this is a thought-provoking book about the female body in pain, sexuality, the struggle for recovery and change —not only hers and not only in the Irish context, but universally.<sup>4</sup> In sum, *Constellations* constitutes a brave, determined and coherent representation of Gleeson’s mediating role as a social writer who, in holding a mirror up to politics, presents an original view of social transformation, suggesting what the future will or could be like for women in society. In doing so, the collection is a courageous example of essayism on the vulnerable and disabled body, sex, politics, irony, and anger that crosses many borders: between the geographical and social, theory and practice, and thinking and creating, just as the little magazines did at the start of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

However, the next question would be: what is a border? As Bill Ashcroft argues,

We tend to think of borders as geographical [...]. But boundaries are profoundly ideological. A border is not a thing but a practice [...] that produces power

relationships, and establishes inequalities between those who are in and those who are not [...]. Bordering practices, whether carried out by the hegemonic activities of the state, or the cultural bordering that sets up borders of ethnicity, sexuality, class, satisfy the myriad ways in which subjects might determine their ‘others’. (2021: 10-11)

The concept of border poetics can thus be considered an inspiring challenge to explore the other in terms of sex, race, class, ideology, religious belief and nation, all of which lie beyond the widely accepted definitions of and theories on the border. The perspective of this study helps to establish the significance of the border and its location at the centre of human life. The scope and variety of bordering practices suggested by Ashcroft are the object of analysis in this essay on Gleeson’s *Constellations*, approached within a border poetics framework.

## 2. Border Poetics

The arguments in this article respond to Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe’s claim for a need for “more analytical work around the structure of border narratives, both those of border crossings and of the processes of border formation: the creation, maintenance, change and erasure of borders, involving both state institutions and individuals” (2007: 25). The poetics of encounters provides a set of strategies for analysing and identifying meaning and the processes of border-making and border permeability in contemporary societies through aesthetic forms. ‘Border poetics’,<sup>6</sup> a term coined by Schimanski and Wolfe, is a framework for working with borders, border processes, representation, aesthetics and literature. It examines the role of art and culture in constructing and tracing borders, focusing on narratives and other symbolic forms, and on the important subjective dimension which cultural forms mediate in the public sphere. As Liv Lundberg asserts:

We have no other experience of living than through encounters, and in these meeting-places language has evolved through a natural necessity of communication, probably the reason for language development in the first place [...]. A poetics of encounters offers a way of acknowledging the world and other people without seeking to reduce them to objects [...] art and science must co-operate to create epistemological and ecological models of the human condition on planet Earth. The realities we encounter in human life must include both the material and mental aspects of existence. (2014: 171-172)

Gleeson particularly acknowledges the world and shows her understanding of the human condition and illness, including “both the material and mental aspects of existence” in the sixth essay of her collection, titled “Panopticon: Hospital Visions”. There she argues:

Hospitals are not unlike galleries. Interactive spaces; a large-scale installation of sound and colour, evoking emotion and working on the senses. The art on the walls here mixes modernity and old votives [...]. On the longest corridor, the hospital's spine, black paintings hang at clockwork intervals. Abstract, inked, their form and meaning unclear. I look down whenever I pass them. *Bit depressing, aren't they?* says the porter pushing my wheelchair. (Gleeson 2019: 109)

Gleeson's mental energy and new forms of thought are shaped in beautifully anarchic ways in the passage above, uncovering the aforementioned concerns of border poetics in this way. Moreover, just as Irish modernist authors like James Joyce, for example, incorporated an aesthetics of embodiment and disability into their short fiction published in little magazines a century earlier, so does Gleeson in this non-fiction passage.<sup>7</sup> Border poetics is an appropriate framework to examine Gleeson's purpose in her essays because it "might establish relationships expressing proximity rather than contemplative or legislative distance" (Lundberg 2014: 172).

The next sections will show that border poetics can help to explore how and to what effect the devices proposed by Schimanski and Wolfe can be used to relate Gleeson's essayism to several concepts of border crossing, such as how the border crosser and border-crossing narratives work from a feminist perspective in *Constellations*. The concept of border poetics proposed will illuminate Gleeson's developments in research on the use of non-fiction in public debates regarding the narratives of migrants and tourists.

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### **3. Crossing Borders in Sinéad Gleeson's *Constellations***

In this section, I discuss the crossing of the border in an attempt to illuminate its purpose for the production of a narrative, by which Gleeson's individual experiences of the border are connected to larger historical narratives of border formation from other contexts. According to Heidi Isaksen,

The crossing of the border involves the passage of the border crosser from one territory to another [...]. The border crossed by the border crosser may be a physically marked border, or it may be an intangible line, often invisible in space [...]. The territories involved may likewise be politically defined, but also be symbolic spheres or periods in time. All borders must have a spatial dimension, imaginary or otherwise, or else one cannot cross them. ("Border Crossing")

In chapter five, "On the Atomic Nature of Trimesters", Gleeson explores various cultural constructions relating to gender issues in Ireland. Her argument revolves around her female self, motherhood and pregnancy:

I did not pine for a child when I was younger [...] but I back-pocketed the feeling, tucked it away for later. Even with studied carefulness, most women will have a pregnancy scare. Days of checking and waiting. Our biological lives are numerically driven; twenty-eight-day cycles (a rarity) and a two-week wait before peeing on a stick. Then [...] twelve weeks before announcing the news. Or the other option: an unplanned crisis with horror-struck calculations: tallying of dates, totting up the cost and realising its incompatibilities with one's financial situation; the decision —until very recently in Irish history— to travel to another country that offered reproductive rights. (Gleeson 2019: 91-92)

The essay form encourages an open discussion about sexuality and reproductive rights in the Irish public arena. Its discourse has the capacity to question, expose and attack the language of power. The authority of the Catholic Church over the private lives of Irish men and women, which began to be openly challenged before the 1960s, finds its continuity in Gleeson's excerpt above. In this perspective, the writer can be seen as a border crosser regarding cultural constructions about desired pregnancy and motherhood and abortion rights in Ireland. Her essays can also be considered as examples of crossings of the border, that is, as sites for individual intentionality to change society as well as social history.

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In addition to this, *Constellations* puts emphasis on language as a medium, which is acquired before an individual reaches adolescence, and is shared by all its speakers. Language is recreated in the collection as a tool for the sending of thoughts, interaction, exchanging ideas and understanding feelings of others over time. As the text reads,

The word 'stillness' also contains 'illness'. My bedbound years formed in me a constant reader. Books made being indoors and unable to move more bearable. In the months after her accident, Kahlo took refuge in painting [...]. Her paintings are a lesson in corporeal panic, body-in-peril, a way of communicating pain to those unversed in it [...]. When I look at her work, I am struck by the way the language of the body [...]. For Frida, no words were enough [...]. In illness, it is hard to find the right words [...]. Words can fail us, and they failed Frida. They could not harness what she wanted to say. For her, art —not language— was the medium of her agony. (Gleeson 2019: 180-181)

Apart from the language and art questions as means to express artists' illnesses and pain, Gleeson's essays also cover a significant historical time span, from 1987, a few months after she turned thirteen, up to the year of publication, 2019, a year for reflection. As Gleeson argues in essay twelve, "Twelve Stories of Bodily Autonomy (*for the twelve women a day who leave*)":

Reproductive health is about autonomy, agency, choice and being heard. It is also about money, class, access and privilege. Ireland's history —for women— is the history of our bodies. The goal for the future, at its most basic and unprepossessing,

is equality, respect, reproductive control and equal pay. Change has been hard won. It has been set in motion because of women who speak up, protest, march, lobby and put themselves out there. Shifting their stories from private places to public spotlights. On polling day, I think of all those women as I walk to cast my vote with my children. (Gleeson 2019: 219)

This year is marked in part through the repeal of the Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution on 25 May the year before, when Ireland paved the way for legalized abortion. Here Gleeson crosses the border between reproductive and abortion rights and her essays become more political.<sup>8</sup> Although published nearly two decades after Linda Connolly's 2003 book<sup>9</sup> on the Irish women's movement, Connolly being another border crosser, Gleeson's *Constellations* constitutes one more starting point of an analysis that spawns wider questions about feminism as an agent of political and social change in Ireland. Her borders not only have a spatial dimension, but also an imaginary one. She writes:

Outside I take a photograph of my daughter beside the polling station sign, her body showing its own traces of change. I want to record this moment in the hope that this is the last day that her reproductive rights will be out of her control [...]. I see all the ways her life will be different. She takes my hand, and we walk into the cool air of the hall, to change the future. (Gleeson 2019: 219)

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In this passage, Gleeson refers to the moment in which she and her daughter are about to vote in Ireland's historic referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. In doing so, she crosses both spatial and imaginary borders regarding this matter, and this is aimed at generating continuity and an impact on younger generations, including her daughter and other writers.

Apart from crossing the border in gender issues, the non-fiction writer also does so in another field, the language of medicine. Gleeson narrates her life experiences and the culture of the female body in pain with such dexterity that she produces a reading experience possessing multiple layers, provoking both discomfort and pleasure. She reflects on an early experience of doctors and female patients' appointments: "The orthopaedic doctor [...] does that thing I'm used to male doctors doing: he tells me I'm overreacting. A rotating blade is slicing into my flesh, but I need to calm down. The room fills up with screaming. Me, a ventriloquist throwing pain across the room" (Gleeson 2019: 16). Later, she has a different experience in another encounter: "My consultant, a kind, smart man who has all the warmth lacking in many doctors I've encountered, listened with concern [...] and prescribed a morning-after pill for my predicament" (218). Gleeson regrets experiencing the lack of empathy and sensitivity among male doctors while she was ill and in treatment. *Constellations* thereby facilitates the learning of better ways for doctors to proceed with patients in pain and Gleeson's narrative of past

traumatic experiences can be used as a means to promote the growth of doctors' emotional intelligence. The theoretical framework of border poetics by Schimanski and Wolfe used here shows that writing about the female body in pain can help to give further sense to patients' language of physical and emotional suffering in society. By hinting at many other meanings, Gleeson allows the reader to link ideas and cross all the necessary borders themselves. In other words, border poetics here facilitates meditation upon the socio-political implications of the border between hospitals and patients. Gleeson offers another example of this where she makes the reader reflect upon ethics, which helps them assess the quality of decisions and shape their choices involving the issue of blood donation, for example, as shown in the following quotation:

Blood donation is that rare and uncomplicated incident of a selfless good deed. The taking of time to attend a clinic, the ritualistic act of allowing a nurse to drain blood. The Irish Blood Transfusion Service collectively describes blood, platelets and plasma as 'blood products': strangely consumerist language for an act that is devoid of the politics of transaction. There is no monetary benefit to the donor-recipient relationship, and despite this, I have remained curious about all the blood I've received. Post-surgery, post-childbirth and in chemotherapy I've received around 150 units. A unit is one bag; it contains 470 millilitres, so almost 70,500 millilitres of other people's blood have been inserted into my body. An altruistic army, none of whom will ever know who received their blood; that a part of them is now part of me. (Gleeson 2019: 38)

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In this passage the border between hospitals and patients is crossed because Gleeson dwells upon blood donors' altruistic choice to help patients with serious illnesses like hers. Gleeson understands the ethical drive in the same way that Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti do in some of their philosophical writings; that is, respectively, as the acknowledgement of/and loyalty to the vulnerability of the other, and as the transformation of the negative into the affirmative.<sup>10</sup> This sense of the ethical is embodied in her motivation after traversing two serious illnesses and in the border crossing narrative. Thus, Gleeson seems to have developed a social consciousness and believes in the visual arts and their relevance in other contexts of practice. As the following quotation reveals, it is in this artistic world that she seems to have developed a political consciousness without being much aware of it. It is in this complex and problematic terrain between culture and social politics where Gleeson acknowledges that politics are inevitable:

A couple of years ago I attended a literary festival [...] during the Q&A, another writer ... tells me that I'm a political writer. I am? I never knew this, [...] she asks if I reject this idea (I honestly don't) [...] No matter what or how you write about the female body —from reproduction to sexuality, illness to motherhood— it is politicised. (2019: 210)

*Constellations* is closely connected to Gleeson's physical body, which is situated in a specific time and place, contemporary Ireland. Her book is an act of living the border, because her essays represent the embodiment of the language of inquiry. Her essays have the capacity to enter those zones known as borderlands where the reader meets strange things and unknown people. The language of her essays enables the reader to understand new experiences. *Constellations* represents the condition of doubt and the uncertainties provoked by being foreign to a situation (Gleeson's two potentially deadly illnesses); a condition which is simultaneously an impasse and a passage, which provides the reader with awareness of the limits of the border.

#### 4. Sinéad Gleeson's *Constellations* as a Border-Crossing Narrative

The theoretical basis of border poetics is to see the border from the processual and embodied perspective of the border-crossing narrative.<sup>11</sup> Narratives of border crossing connect individual experiences of the border to larger historical narratives of border formation. Every narrative of this type can thus be apprehended as a performative renegotiation of the border. Traditional understandings of borders as constituting physical and visible lines of separation between political, social and economic spaces are thus replaced within the social sciences<sup>12</sup> by an understanding of the border as a process. According to David Newman,

The process through which borders are demarcated and managed are central to the notion of border as process and border as institution [...]. Demarcation is not simply the drawing of a line on a map or the construction of a fence in the physical landscape. It is the process through which borders are constructed and the categories of difference or separation created. (2007: 35)

Border poetics helps us not only to generate critical thinking about the world as it changes around us, but also to engage with the challenges presented by such changes.<sup>13</sup> Gleeson's innovative collection not only aims at integrating questions of gender, cultural and other forms of identity and politics, but also conveys the literariness of many types of text through essayism. This integration is central to border poetics as a field of cultural analysis; to reflect on literariness is to keep before us, as resources for analysing Gleeson's narrative discourse, "reading practices elicited by literature: the suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility, reflection on the implications of means of expression and attention to how meaning is made and pleasure produced" (Culler 1997: 41). *Constellations*, thus, generates critical discourse regarding, first, the urgent need for the erasure of borderlines, and second, the reasons behind some critics' and theorists' promotion

of certain literary forms and dismissal of others, like the essay and various other cultural products referred to within the collection. Patrick Freyne comments on why Gleeson wrote in essays rather than in any other form,

[s]he [Gleeson] wrote five or six chapters. “It started pouring out of me”. But she realised that she didn’t want to write a straightforward memoir and certainly didn’t want to write a book all about illness and death. So she put it aside. A few more years passed and through her work she learned more about writing and began to see all the possibilities of the essay form. “Essays are a good way of describing what’s happening”, she says. “They’re not straightforward linear chunks of prose. Some [of my essays] look like poems. I wasn’t interested in writing 14 pieces that all look the same”. (2019)

As to the first critical discourse regarding the immediate necessity for the deletion of borderlines, *Constellations* touches upon the lives of a large number of public and historical figures, such as Frida Kahlo, Roald Dahl and the Maggies of the Magdalene Laundries in multiple fields and countries, their deeds, emotions, illnesses and the impact of their work on culture and society over time. The cultural practices around the fe/male body in pain by various artists of different sexes recreated in the book convert it into a border-crossing narrative. Gleeson’s essays also reveal the synergy of women’s writings in conversation with one another, for example, Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* (1994) and Abi Andrews’s novel *The Word for Woman is Wilderness* (2018). Her feminist approach, conveyed by her articulation of feminist concerns, such as the removal of legal and bureaucratic obstacles to equality or the legalization of abortion, and by her selection of a diverse range of documents, from both high- and popular culture, canonical and understudied, redefines the female self and body, yet also culture. Moreover, Gleeson’s critical acumen and broad knowledge of music and art point to new avenues of inquiry about women’s selves, bodies and culture.

*Constellations* has an encyclopaedic nature because of the enormous amount of medical, artistic, cultural, historical and critical reflections on the female body narrated within it. References to Karl Landsteiner to Frida Kahlo, Roald Dahl, Dervla Murphy and the Magdalene Laundries, Gleeson’s collection is allusive and intertextual and hints at many other cultural issues but leaves it to the reader to link such ideas and create different meanings. As Gleeson argues,

Kahlo died in 1954 aged forty-seven, a year after her leg was finally amputated; [Jo] Spence in 1992 from leukaemia (was it the same kind as mine?), and [Lucy] Grealy, who became reliant on painkillers, a decade later at thirty-nine from heroin overdose. Representing a diagnosis—in art, words or photos—is an attempt to explain to ourselves what has happened, to deconstruct the world and rebuild it in our own way. Perhaps articulating a life-changing illness is part of recovery. But so is finding the kind of articulation that is specific to you. Kahlo, Grealy and Spence were lights

in the dark for me, a form of guidance. A triangular constellation [...] making wounds the source of inspiration, not the end of it. (2019: 189)

If one adds to these characteristics the large number of themes, such as blood, contraception, dementia, and life experiences around the female body in pain, the scope of the collection expands exponentially. In sum, her non-fictional narration of the (female) body recreates the power and limitations of narrative.

As far as the second critical discourse is concerned, that is, the reasons behind some critics' and theorists' promotion of certain literary forms and dismissal of others, or the standing of different cultural forms, Gleeson's *Constellations* explores differences in literary sensibility, aesthetic preferences, varieties of style and diction, and diverse cultural practices and themes. These naturally result from a creative clash of literary traditions and artistic choices formed and fostered in different environments but coming into a creative confrontation in movements across real and imagined frontiers within global Irish studies. Her essays explore forms like poems, letters or constellations, her own modernist drawings, and confirm her interest in a wide range of cultural practices. As a result, she uncovers various ways in which the Irish literary tradition is part of a broader constellation of influences in which border poetics marks an inspiring challenge for creative trespass.

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In a long line of modernist Irish writers who deliberately looked outside of Ireland for artistic inspiration and recognition, James Joyce, Thomas MacGreevy, Kate O'Brien, Maeve Brennan and Samuel Beckett among them, Gleeson is a conspicuous example of an artist whose imagination has been shaped by the experience of crossing and re-crossing the imaginary frontier. This concept of productive translation between cultures and literary traditions phrased in various inflections of language and art forms remains part of Irish peoples' ability to reimagine themselves and travel between cultures.

*Constellations* is also a unique non-fiction example of synaesthesia. When reading about pain, the reader not only experiences a concurrent subjective physical feeling other than the one being discussed, but also perceives the written material with more than one sense at once. For instance, at the point where the text reads: "The synovial fluid in my left hip began to evaporate like rain. The bones ground together, literally turning to dust. It happened quickly, an inverse magician's trick. Now you *don't* see it, now you do" (Gleeson 2019: 1). Just as sensory responses converge when reading *Constellations*, so are mental reflections combined with such sensorial reflections. Gleeson's collection crosses borders because of its multiplicity of sensitivities, the same ones that informed modernist art at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> These borders not only show the role of culture in generating social change, but also the literariness of texts of all types.

*Constellations* is a border-crossing narrative because it explores themes which focus on social and cultural divisions, such as those that pertain to politics, religion, gender, class, (dis)ability, race, and ethnicity. Finally, the collection is also a product of imagination inspired and nurtured by global traditions connected with the European artistic avant-gardes. In a multicultural, postcolonial and diasporic context, Irish cultural heritage and artistic inventiveness, such as the reader finds in Gleeson's collection of essays, positively engages with local traditions from the rest of the world and proves the literariness of non-fiction.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Sinéad Gleeson's Imagined Developments: The Use of Non-Fiction in Public Debates on the Female Redefinition of Borders

So far, this discussion has been mainly concerned with the aesthetics of Gleeson's work. According to Schimanski and Wolfe, however, "there is much room for transferring lessons learnt in this context to ways of dealing with all kinds of border narrative and figuration" (2007: 25). The last section of this discussion will deal with Gleeson's "imagined developments in research on the use of non-fiction in public debates on the narratives of migrants [...] and tourists" (2019: 25) as recreated in the eleventh essay in *Constellations*, "The Adventure Narrative". Here, Gleeson sets out to write about adventure tales, "timeless accounts of valour and daring", claiming that "for centuries, these stories did not belong to women" (192-193). Her essay creates points of discussion and draws attention to gaps in research on the stories of these female migrants and tourists, making them more visible to the reader. If the reader looks backwards, she argues,

Magellan and Amundsen, Captain Cook and Francis Drake, 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume?' Accounts of derring-do dominated by men [...] the adventure narrative has always been built on stories of masculinity. Men are its central subject; more worthy of defining it and experiencing it [...]. Women stayed home, maintaining the equilibrium of domesticity.

Leaving on a whim to go travelling was traditionally the preserve of one gender, and those of means: money, and being male, helped. The demands at home anchored women there and it was men who got to leave [...] or to encounter the possibility of adventure [...] a license to drop all responsibility —of making a wage, or helping to raise a family. No wonder it seemed so inviting, this complete divesting of domestic expectation and workaday commitments. (Gleeson 2019: 193)

Gleeson's essay opens up a public debate on the narratives of these adventurers and tourists, claiming that "circumnavigation, one of the greatest possible adventures

[was] a male preserve—at least until Nelly Bly decided otherwise” (Gleeson 2019: 193) in the nineteenth century, when she decided to recreate Phileas Fogg’s around the world trip, from Jules Verne’s novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), and do it solo. The Irish writer not only dwells upon Bly’s taking off her female clothes, but also completing the trip in just seventy-two days, facing much opposition because she dared not to ask for permission from a male relative. Like countless other women who were determined to see the world on their own terms, women like Bly neither appeared in history books, nor were they taught in schools and immortalised in paintings. Gleeson’s essay aims at transferring lessons learnt in the nineteenth century context to ways of dealing with all kinds of border narrative and figuration that she recreates in this essay. Accordingly, she remarks critically that “The female adventurer was regarded with suspicion” rather than comprehension, and was judged for her spirited characteristics and her capacity to thrill (Gleeson 2019: 196).

Further, she discusses the Madgalene Laundries in Ireland, a country which “has been adept in judging its young girls for these characteristics”, that is, for being “too independent, full of sharp and big ideas, or just too full of babies” (Gleeson 2019: 196). Gleeson’s border narrative opens up a debate on the lives of the women who were sequestered in these laundries, “pregnant and unmarried”, and who “were expected to exude gratitude for being ‘saved’” (196). Gleeson’s essay not only addresses these institutions as prisons by another name, but also revisits the debate around “remote farmhouses to nursing homes or to the attics of relatives in the city; journeys to England to start a new life, replacing the old” (197). In other words, journeys that Irish women took to access abortion services.

Gleeson’s interest in women and gender issues coincides with a time in which Ireland is becoming more culturally liberal in many respects.<sup>16</sup> On 25 May 2018, the referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution was joyfully celebrated around Ireland and the world, placing the country at the leading edge of a social revolution.<sup>17</sup> Without any doubt, it was a historic day for Ireland.<sup>18</sup> However, as Gleeson argues in ironic terms, “in the twenty-first century —when it’s perfectly acceptable to go almost anywhere— a woman bound for the mountains or forests or the open sea will still be asked, so casually: Aren’t you nervous?” (Gleeson 2019: 197). In this regard, Gleeson uses the essay form to challenge literary and gender conventions through the contents of this essay and these women’s lives, contributing to the critical debate on crossing gender borders in non-fiction terms.

To this challenging end, Gleeson dwells upon women alpinists Junko Tabei and Ann Bancroft, qualified pilots and talented writers Beryl Markham and Lilian

Bland, adventurer Mary Heath, mountaineer Annie Smith Peck, and explorer Fanny Bullock Workman. They were all “women full of curiosity and allergic to compromise [...], but also took charge and wrote their own narratives. They ignored the prevailing admonition to stay put and stay quiet” (Gleeson 2019: 199). However, as she further argues, for millions of “poor girls, women with illness or reduced ability, those whose role in the world has been decided, immovable as stone”, there were “no grand adventures or aerial views” (199). Gleeson aims at breaking borders by telling, not just the narratives of these migrants and tourists,<sup>19</sup> but also the stories told by female public storytellers<sup>20</sup> that also featured wanderers, “but they themselves were discouraged from wandering far from home” (202). In doing so, Gleeson contests assumptions about “the content of women’s writing” (203) as being necessarily connected to women as compared to men’s writing, assumptions which were at the centre of storytelling. Gleeson’s imagined developments on subjects supposedly connected to women storytellers are conveyed through rhetorical questions: “Don’t we all fall in love? Have families? Die? Fuck? Why is the distinction in reverence based on who the teller is?” (203). In sum, Gleeson’s essay “The Adventure Narrative” transfers lessons learnt in gender matters to ways of tackling all types of border narrative and figures of her imagination. She imagines a different narrative of female independent travellers, wanderers, migrants and tourists as well as of the stories of those Irish women who were “kept” in rural areas or incarcerated behind the walls of various institutions. As a woman, Gleeson reclaims a distinct orientation and the breaking of social and institutional borders regarding these gender issues, concluding her essay this way:

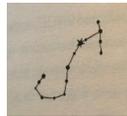
Each footstep on a journey moves the traveller away from a life and into another, and perhaps the memory of the piece left behind sustains even the weariest nomad. Untethered to us, that part of ourselves that stayed back might have changed. There is always the option of reclaiming it, certainly, but new paths and red hills may have already been displaced by something newer [...] I am a complicated traveller [...] Adventure operates in the realm of unpredictability [...] But we orient ourselves towards it, bending to the horizon, with all that it offers and conceals (2019: 204-206).

Therefore, Gleeson’s essays uncover the structure of border narratives, involving both individuals and state institutions. Her individual experiences of the border are mediated in their most marked form through narrative texts and works having a distinct aesthetic element. *Constellations* suggests that a focus on borders in non-fiction texts and other aesthetic works can offer an exemplary impetus for the examination of the intricacy of narrative and figuration existing in other types of discourse within a wider cultural and political field.

## 6. Conclusion

The border poetics framework has proved to be a suitable tool to examine Gleeson's book of essays as a constellation of potentiality containing a healing and empowering form of writing, for it is an extremely allusive and intertextual collection. The weight of inquiry in it does not lead the reader into the comfort of pitying the writer, but into an interrogation of themselves and the way societies are often fixated on the body rather than valuing the fact that there are many disabled bodies. Gleeson paradoxically celebrates the body as the most obvious indicator of disability and vulnerability. The reader has much to address, too, because, as part of the population receiving her text, they are implicated.

*Constellations* is written in the essay form, a form associated with women's history, and uses both the body narrative and the stars in its structure. As the text reads:



The Moons of Motherhood

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They arrive at night, my children. Pulsing into the dark, entering the world when the moon is up: a new moon on the day my son is born, a waxing crescent for my daughter. After that first night my daughter and I were apart, the second night is spent attempting to feed her. The US election results roll in [...]. Across the ocean, there is hope. States declare themselves blue and Barak Obama is about to be elected. In our small room, all I can do is to stare at my new daughter. There is possibility in every molecule of her and tonight, in the world too. (Gleeson 2019: 119)

Gleeson draws from an existing form and constructs a new one with poems of her own more suited to her needs —a form that compels the audience to read differently, to enter into a unique experience. And like modernist authors, Gleeson's voice is distinctly her own. The essay form reveals a spirit of adventure and of unfinishedness, because it aspires towards much else: crossing borders. The end of the same essay mentioned above reads:

The American writer Barry Hannah said that there's a ghost in every story: a place, a memory, a feeling long forgotten. Experiences that never fully recede, people who leave an imprint [...]. For a long time, my grandmother was a ghost in her own story,

living outside of herself as a result of fear and grief. Her mother was haunted too [...]. Alongside the women who preceded them, those armies of mothers and Magdalenes, women who wanted so much from the world; women who never asked for anything; [...] disappeared women, ground down by fate; but women, too, who left for something better, or those who found a sense of self —either peace or wildness within; women who found whatever it was they wanted; and all the women who walked into the fire of the future without a backward glance. (Gleeson 2019: 151)

The application of border poetics to this study allows us to uncover new perspectives about the female self and the body when it is in pain and struggling for recovery; yet it also demands social and cultural change both in the Irish context and internationally. The end of Gleeson's book poses a question for us all: what constitutes a self-determined life, a life well lived? For her, it is a life that is lived in a vital and real way, and that engages with exactly how we are. Her resilience is active and precedes transformation. This is how Gleeson understands transformation as expressed in poetic terms in her final essay "A Non-Letter to My Daughter (named for a warrior queen)":

Don't change if you don't want to  
But change is a leap into the light  
Chrysalis, hit and miss  
I realise that *don't* is not a word  
we should direct at girls. (Gleeson 2019: 238)

*Constellations* is a metaphor for change, a renewed way of seeing the literary space as a meeting point where the representation of various types of knowledge is a question of acknowledging that the borders are invisible. Gleeson is a real border crosser and her book of essays a border-crossing narrative. Its performative renegotiation of the border constitutes a process that calls on us to value difference, and not just by celebrating difference, but also by not allowing ourselves to reinforce systematic borders through institutional policies and procedures.

## Notes

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1. See volume 135 of *Granta* on new Irish writing, edited by Sigrid Rausing.

2. For essays on mental and physical health, see Pine (2018).

3. For essays on the effects of Alzheimer's disease on a family and loss, see Maleney (2019).

4. Gleeson's *Constellations* would be an example of the use of the body as a narratological object (Punday 2003) in her twelve essays.

5. Gleeson's individual experiences of the border are mediated in their most

marked form through *Constellations* as an aesthetic work and a narrative text. However, because of its non-fiction nature, this discussion differs from previous research on border poetics or liminality such as Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Elin Holmsten's *Liminal Borderlands in Irish Literature and Culture* (2009), where the critics examine the theme of liminality in contemporary Irish literature, art and film in a variety of contexts.

6. For more on border poetics, see Sarkar and Munshi (2021) and the entry "Border Poetics" on Heidi Isaksen's website at <http://borderpoetics.wikidot.com/border-poetics>.

7. James Joyce's *The Dubliners* was published on 15 June 1914 in *The Little Review*. For more on the disabled body in modernist texts, see Davidson (2019).

8. Just as when she condemns the denial of Savita Halappanavar's request for an abortion in 2012, then illegal under Irish law, resulting in her death from septic miscarriage.

9. See Connolly (2003).

10. See Valdés (2016).

11. See Isaksen's website at <http://borderpoetics.wikidot.com/about-border-poetics-key-terms>.

12. According to Adam Roberts, the value of crossing disciplinary boundaries, such as the Humanities and Social Sciences, is very significant for what it means to be human: "the words, ideas, narratives and the art and artefacts that help us make sense of our lives and the world we live in; how we have created it and are created by it. The social sciences seek to explore through observation and reflection the processes that govern the behaviour of individuals and groups. Together they help us to understand ourselves, our society and our place in the world" (2010: 2).

13. Take as examples pandemics, climate change, geopolitical inequalities triggered by emerging economies, or the

introduction of new technologies in our lives and culture.

14. As Wendy J. Truran argues, "In 'Love and the Art Object', Joanne Winning focuses on the dissident desires of the lesbian artist via a discussion of Virginia Woolf, the portraitist Gluck (Hannah Gluckstein) and designer and architect Eileen Gray. Winning claims that lesbian modernists' hypersensitivity to materiality renders their objects saturated with affect" (2017: 843).

15. This idea is backed up by Paige Reynolds, who claims that the contemporary Irish essay has not only opened up the form "to European influences but also to a range of affects from desire to bathos" (2020: 17).

16. For further discussion of these gender issues, see Terrazas (2018: 1-5).

17. Ireland also elected a gay, mixed-race prime minister in 2017. His election was historic given his characteristics.

18. Another recent example of historic day for Ireland and Irish women was January 2021. The final report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation detailed that around 9,000 children had died in these institutions between 1922 and 1998. A few days later, Taoiseach Micheál Martin made a formal apology to survivors on behalf of the state.

19. Gleeson tells the stories of further Irish female migrants, such as Dervla Murphy, who set out to cycle to India in 1963 and said "goodbye to a country that viewed solo, curious women as dangerous" (201), and demonstrated "in actions and deeds that women could do anything, and that independence and solitude were to be prized" (2019: 202).

20. This is the Irish tradition of the *seanachai* with renowned female storytellers, such as Peig Sayers and Bab Feirtéar.

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